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State program reaches out to veterans who need help

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Since terrorists struck the United States on Sept. 11, 2001, more than 230,000 troops have been deployed to wars in Afghanistan and Iraq from Virginia military bases.

Now, a state program is trying to help those coming back to find help for problems they might not even want to discuss.

The Virginia Wounded Warrior Program is using a tiny budget to reach a big problem -- veterans with behavioral-health problems, ranging from depression and post-traumatic stress disorder to traumatic brain injuries.

More than 813,000 military veterans live in Virginia, including more than 38,000 veterans of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. And that doesn't include the families of service members who have been deployed.

"This is just the tip of the iceberg as far as we're concerned," said Mary Ann Bergeron, executive director of the Virginia Association of Community Services Boards. "When they come back, families expect the same person. Well, they're not getting the same person."

Bergeron's association represents community agencies that are joining with the fledgling program to find services for veterans of all eras, but especially the ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Veterans don't have to have endured combat experience to get help from the program, which is part of the Virginia Department of Veterans Services.

Beal Carter, for example, is a former U.S. Army cook who left the service 30 years ago. He has struggled with depression and the loss of his right leg, which was amputated almost 10 years ago because of a staph infection he picked up in a Veterans Administration hospital in upstate New York.

This week, Carter got a new wheelchair ramp for his South Richmond home, thanks to the work of the Wounded Warrior Program and volunteers for ElderHomes, a local nonprofit organization that provides housing assistance for people with low incomes.

"It's like God is putting them in my life at the right time in the right place," said Carter, 50, who grew up in the Northern Neck and was homeless when he moved to Richmond more than a year ago.

The 23-foot-long modular ramp is one of about 300 that ElderHomes has built and installed in the past three years at no charge for disabled Virginians with low incomes.

The Wounded Warrior Program helped make it happen, just as it did in fixing Carter's handicap-accessible van, which he needed to get to doctor's appointments at McGuire Veterans Affairs Medical Center, a short drive from his home on Bells Road.

"It's really about community collaboration," said Edward M. McIntosh, an Army veteran who serves as coordinator of the Wounded Warrior Program for the region that includes the Richmond area.

McIntosh served in the Persian Gulf War and the conflict in Somalia in the 1990s, before he earned a master's degree in social work from Virginia Commonwealth University.

Now he's trying to connect veterans with the services they need, whether from the federal VA system, the state's system of local community services boards, or nonprofits such as ElderHomes and Caritas, which helped Carter furnish the house that a VA supportive housing program found for him.

"It's partnership and collaboration, using the existing resources in the most efficient and effective way possible," said Catherine Wilson, a retired Navy captain who is executive director of the 2-year-old program.

The program is operating with an annual budget of \$2 million, of which \$1.7 million was awarded through a competitive grant process to the five health planning regions of the state. But since its founding in mid-2008, the Wounded Warrior Program has:

- received a grant for almost \$400,000 from the Commonwealth Neurotrauma Initiative to help train service providers in how to care for someone with traumatic brain injury;
- held training sessions for providers in all five regions on traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder;
- prompted community services boards to identify veterans who already are receiving services, creating a database that can be used to ensure that veterans and families get all the help to which they are entitled; and
- partnered with the Department of Defense's Real Warriors Campaign, which is aimed at veterans who are reluctant to seek help. "They are trying to reduce the stigma," Wilson said. "It's OK for real warriors to ask for help."

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